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SUBJECT: Zimbabwean Media and Public Opinion on War in Iraq

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11. (SBU) Summary: In spite of efforts by both government-owned and privately owned media to spin war news for local political purposes, the conflict in Iraq remains a distant concern for the great majority of Zimbabweans. Public opinion is quietly anti-war and tends to reflect public opinion toward the Government of Zimbabwe: Government supporters oppose the war, and critics of the government, while not gung-ho supporters of the Coalition, show some sympathy for the need to depose Saddam Hussein. The Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) has expressed strong opposition to the war and argues that U.S. actions in Iraq represent a threat to Zimbabwe and the world. Popular opinion is not greatly influenced by GOZ attempts to portray the war as a threat to Zimbabwe. On the street, there is no sign of the war other than newspaper headlines. There have been no demonstrations or graffiti related to the war, and the war does not dominate our casual, day-to-day contact with Zimbabweans. For most Zimbabweans, the war in Iraq is so far removed from their daily lives that they treat it more like a movie or the latest TV "reality" show than a serious geo-political conflict. End summary.

Zimbabwean Media "Spin" War News in Different
Directions

12. (SBU) Both sides of Zimbabwe's polarized media are seeking to use the war in Iraq to advance political messages. Government-owned media get top honors, though, for both quantity and shrillness of their messages. Government-owned dailies "The Herald" and "The Chronicle" offer readers a mixture of sensational headlines over reasonably straightforward wire service (primarily AFP and Reuters) stories, and staunchly anti-US opinion pieces from obscure left-wing news services and local pundits.
13. (U) The front page of the April 2 "Herald" illustrates GOZ attitudes toward the war and the way government editors manipulate the news. A reasonably responsible AFP report on the tragedy of Iraqi civilians killed when their vehicle failed to stop at a roadblock was reprinted under an above-the-fold, blood-red banner that read "US Massacres 48 - Victims include women, children." The op-ed spread in the same edition gave a full page to two stories: "US Lies Exposed" and "US, UK Conflict Over Spoils of War." These stories came from an international Trotskyite organization.
14. (U) All free-to-air broadcast media in Zimbabwe is owned and tightly controlled by the GOZ. As a result, average Zimbabweans receive a steady diet of distinctly anti-American radio and television reports and news "analysis." Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) television news focuses on Iraqi civilian casualties, and tends to feature video loops alternating between Iraqi government officials in press conferences and images of wounded Iraqi children. ZBC also produces a nightly discussion program on Iraq, called "U.S.-UK Invasion of Iraq," that invites mostly anti-American Zimbabweans to discuss the war.
15. (SBU) The purpose of government media spin is clear: Show the US to be an uncaring, neo-colonialist hegemon and show the Iraqis to be courageous, principled victims. This spin complements the GOZ's campaign to cast itself as a courageous and principled government standing up to an uncaring neo-colonialist hegemon. Government media have not dedicated any time or space to examining Saddam Hussein's history or style of government. The GOZ and its media have long made use of external enemies to deflect public attention from the real causes of Zimbabwe's problems. Traditionally, the UK has been the primary target of

these campaigns. The war in Iraq, however, has given the GOZ an opportunity to cast the U.S. as the most dangerous enemy, so we have temporarily replaced the British in GOZ propaganda efforts.

16. (U) Privately owned media provide more responsible coverage of the war, but are also trying to spin events in Iraq to support their political agendas. War coverage, mostly straight from Reuters and AP, is published in inside pages. Headlines are dispassionate. Op-ed writers, though, have seized on the principle that dictators face serious consequences. A few have suggested that the world should turn its attention to Zimbabwe once Saddam Hussein has been removed from power. The privately owned media have published news stories and op-ed pieces that raise the issues of Saddam Hussein's human rights record, use of WMD, and attacks against neighboring countries. Overall, Zimbabwe's private media provide generally balanced news reporting while using the example of Saddam Hussein to highlight Zimbabwe's own problems with autocratic leadership

Iraq Debate is a Luxury for Most

17. (SBU) While countervailing government and private media spin may provide some diversion for Zimbabwe's elite, the war is of little consequence to the great majority of Zimbabweans. Most Zimbabweans feel no particular connection to Iraq, are not Muslim, and are fully occupied with the day-to-day pressures of making ends meet in Zimbabwe's dysfunctional economy and highly charged political environment. There have been no anti-US or pro-Iraq demonstrations in Zimbabwe, nor any apparent rejection of the American cultural symbols (food outlets, clothing styles, music) among young Zimbabweans. Embassy officers and their families have encountered almost no Iraq-related hostility from Zimbabweans.
18. (U) Among the elite (generally people with access to international news sources), attitude toward the war in Iraq correlates positively to attitude toward the government of Robert Mugabe. The more strongly an individual supports Mugabe, the more likely it is he or she will oppose the war against Saddam Hussein. Among these people, the prevalent perceptions are that the war is for control of Iraqi oil, that the U.S. is again demonstrating its "cowboy" or "global cop" approach to the world, and that the death of Iraqi civilians proves that America is amoral and relieves the U.S. of any right to complain about human rights in Zimbabwe. The elite who favor reform in Zimbabwe tend to see the war in Iraq in more nuanced terms. Only a few strongly support the war. These few are the same people who would like to see coalition military forces drive straight from Baghdad to Harare. Most reform-minded elite Zimbabweans appreciate the dimensions of Saddam Hussein's crimes and are sympathetic to the imperative of deposing him. Many of them, however, are not persuaded that the U.S. was right to act without full UN backing and believe that we should have given diplomacy more time. Many of these people are also concerned that U.S. action has damaged the UN and that the long-term result of the war will be to create many more fanatics determined to attack the U.S.

Action Show?

19. (SBU) Perhaps the most telling illustration of Zimbabwean popular attitude toward the war is the way audiences react to war video. The Embassy's public affairs section is standing-room only each day when it shows international television news of the war. On occasion, the almost exclusively male audience will break into cheers and applause for some telegenic bit of violence (e.g., a burning tank, or an especially large explosion). The Zimbabwean audience doesn't seem to care whether the violence is against Coalition or Iraqi forces - they just enjoy the spectacle. The conclusion we draw from this is that, for most Zimbabweans, the war is simply not real; it is so remote that audiences relate to it the way they might relate to an action movie. They may identify more closely with the Iraqis than the Americans, but it is not a passionate identification. In the end, we suspect that many Zimbabweans will want to identify with the winners and that long-term resentment of U.S. action in Iraq will be limited to the pro-government elite.

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